



#TheCWords

Women in the Boardroom

SPRING
FORWARD
culture + confidence + choice



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Women in the Boardroom

Introduction

This paper does not seek to make the case for increased diversity in the boardroom. That has already been made and won. We are looking at how easy it is for women to get through the boardroom door and how comfortable it is for them around the table.

For the last 18 years I have worked in Corporate Communications, for the decade before that at the BBC.

It has been my privilege to work with many gifted and inspiring men and women. I have never felt judged by my gender and I have forged a successful career without feeling held back in any way. But I know I have been paid less than my male counterparts for doing the same job and I led a campaign in the late 1990s whilst at the BBC, to raise awareness about the gender pay gap at the corporation. Sadly not much has changed.

Women at work

My first paid employment was as a Saturday girl for Woolworths in Plymouth in 1987. I was 15. Soon after, I got a rather better paid role at BBC Radio Devon for four hours on a Saturday, a role I adored and there began my life-long love of communication and telling people's stories.

When I first started working, pretty much all the top jobs were taken by men; but once I got to the BBC in London, I started to see some high-profile women; and when I left the BBC in 2000, I had the privilege of working with some inspirational women at Christian Aid, Children's Hospice South West and FirstGroup plc. But I knew inequality was still rife in the workplace.

In 2019 the place of work is still not equitable for men and women; nor indeed for those from a Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) background, the disabled, older people. I am proud to live in the City of Bristol, the first city to adopt an Equity Charter Mark. The Mayor has brought together all of these issues under one umbrella, working together to ensure a fairer Bristol and putting an end to 'equality Top Trumps'.

This White Paper looks at the specific research undertaken by Janice Guy of Jungle Green Market Research at our first Spring Forward Conference in 2018. We tested my long-held hypothesis that there are three main issues at play in the workplace that hold women back: **culture, confidence and choice**.

I hope you enjoy this paper and will commit to making some changes, for yourself, for women and for your business or organisation.



| Sarah Pinch Chart.PR, FCIPR, MIOD

MD, Pinch Point Communications; Chair, Taylor Bennett Foundation; Non-Executive Director, The Health and Safety Executive; Non-Executive Director, Filament PR; and Independent Advisor to the National Assembly for Wales Commission.

Over the last two decades the issue of the different experience women have at work has become a topic of increasing interest. How do we get more women into senior roles? Why do so many women leave their careers at the pinnacle point of taking the next step forward to the top?

In 2015 Sarah was President of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), an industry with significant diversity issues. A gender pay gap of £6,725, an industry dominated by women (c75%) in the junior and middle ranks and ruled by men (c65%) in leadership roles. And an industry which is generally identified as 87% white. (CIPR State of the Profession Report 2017/18).

Sarah joined forces with Mary Whenman, the then President of Women in PR (WiPR) and they commissioned Janice Guy at Jungle Green Market Research to undertake research into the reality of being a senior woman in PR. You can read the report here <https://bit.ly/2CX6AIJ> or search for 'CIPR and WiPR PR and Pay Equity'. The report is stark and makes for uncomfortable reading.

The Spring Forward Conference took place in May 2018 with more than 40 women coming together in Bristol for our inaugural conference. Our headline speakers were Karen Boswell OBE, Group Chief Administrative Officer and Managing Director of Hitachi Rail Europe and Nathalie McGloin, award winning, disabled, racing car driver.

We held two panel discussions: The Secret of my Success hearing from Lisa Ashton MBE, The Winnie Mabaso Foundation; Trish Johnson, Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust; and Sarah Wait, Kantar Media and How to Get on Board, with tips from Women on Boards, The Cabinet Office, Emery Support Services and the charity, Penny Brohn.

This White Paper is borne out of the experiences of women at the conference, the research we conducted on the day, our own experiences and the experiences of many men and women who we have worked alongside, talked with and listened to. Thank you to everyone who has taken part.

| Janice Guy and Sarah Pinch

The C words

What do we mean by **culture, confidence and choice** and how do they impact women in the workplace?

The three Cs affect everyone, but we believe they affect and impact on women more than anyone else in the workplace. It is these three things that hold women back from reaching their full potential. We explored them in some detail at Spring Forward 2018.

Culture, we know from the research commissioned by the CIPR and WIPR that women are bullied, shouted at, excluded from 'golf course' conversations and forced to take on roles 'like the mother of the company'. At an event in 2017, Sarah was approached by one young woman working in construction, who 'knew' she could not be successful and have a child, her bosses had made that clear. She asked Sarah how it felt not to be a mother; "...But I am" she said, and the young woman cried. "But I have been told," she said, "that motherhood and success are entirely incompatible."

"It became clear to me that day, that if I was to change some of the cultural norms, I needed to talk about being a mother sometimes when I was at work. I continue to protect the privacy of my family, especially my child very strongly. I am always clear that the mutuality of support between my husband and I enables us both to do what we need to do. I know that is not the case for every woman. Men need to embrace more home caring responsibilities for women to progress. Of that I am certain. By talking about these issues, I know I am influencing in a small way the culture of the organisations I work in and work for," *Sarah Pinch*.

Confidence. Assertiveness training for women to be more confident, is not the answer. Confidence is multi-layered and to take risks we must have confidence in more than one area. For a group of middle-aged people on an activities holiday to voluntarily capsize their kayaks in the Adriatic Sea, required a lot of confidence. The whole group needed to be confident in each other, in their instructor and in their teaching. Can you swim? Are the instructions clear? Is there a life vest? Does the instructor have means for back up? Will anyone laugh? Is it a supportive environment? Are your fellow holidaymakers going to help? The group spread the risk and undertook the exercise, successfully.

In the workplace, if we apply the same risk assessment approach: Are there other women who have done this? Have I been trained (mentored or sponsored)? Do I know the rules? What if I fail first time? Where's the back up? Things are very different. Women do not have confidence in the systems at play at work. There are too many examples of women not getting to the shortlist when they are competent and qualified and not being supported to apply for promotion. The system undermines their own confidence.

Many women have experience of being expected to change 'to be more alpha female, or male', 'to toughen up' and many have to deny aspects of their home or personal life.

Many women we spoke to have such a lack of confidence, they would rather set up their own thing, as consultants or freelancers where they have the confidence in their own systems of work.

Women have told us they don't want to risk standing out, taking chances. There is a strongly held belief that if you keep your head down, someone will notice you and it will all work out well.

Women in middle and senior management levels thrive as colleagues, and when they look in to the boardroom they see no one, or very few women, like them.

Choice. If there was a pound for every woman who has said, “...but I had no choice; I couldn’t apply for the promotion/ask for more money/work flexibly/keep my appointment to visit my mother/get to the school play” we’d be very rich.

Choice is available to all, but the consequences of those choices are not acceptable or tolerable to every woman.

There are many women working long hours, for small amounts of money because they feel they have no other choice than to take a nightshift, remain the middle manager, start back at the bottom after returning to work. They feel they have no choice. Or they have been told, as one woman was ‘we can do this the easy way or the hard way’ after she had told her boss she was pregnant.

If more men and women supported other women in the workplace, more choices would be available. We would value difference and support changes. Meaning everyone would have more choices. Sometimes, men need to get out of the way, make space for women to come in e.g. all male conference panels. Men need to support women when they are in the room (perhaps by not talking all the time) and talk women up when they are not in the room.

What women told us: the statistics

This section predominantly, but not exclusively, draws on the insights shared with us at the Spring Forward 2018 conference. 40 women were interviewed either in focus groups or via a self-completion questionnaire.

82% feel proud to work in their industry; but a third of respondents were not sure about recommending a career in their industry.

75% experience a flexible working culture, but those working in construction were the least likely to say this, as were younger respondents who perhaps have higher expectations of a flexible culture.

78% agree with the statement ‘I feel my actions and outputs speak a lot louder about me than my gender’.

50% felt valued and respected at work and there is a strong correlation between those who feel valued and those who have overall job satisfaction. Younger respondents once again feeling the least valued and respected.

Almost one third of women we spoke with felt they could agree with the following statements:

- I am satisfied with all aspects of my current job
- There are good opportunities for me to progress and develop in my industry
- I am clear about what I need to do to progress and develop within my industry/field
- I am encouraged to look for opportunities to progress and learn by my employer
- I feel there is strong evidence of equal opportunities within my industry (in all respects)
- I have confidence in the systems at my organisation/company, so I believe everyone will be treated fairly
- I am satisfied that there is enough action being taken by those responsible, to close the gender pay gap in my industry

With only 30% of women who attended Spring Forward 2018 able to agree with these statements, it is also important to note that these women were

a self-selecting group, many of whom had self-funded their place at the conference which was aimed at ‘women who are ready, or want to be ready, to take the next step forward in their career’. Yet two thirds of these women could not agree with these statements.

It is our firmly held belief, based on this evidence, that it will only be when organisations and companies address the three Cs, that the amazing contribution women can make to unlock their full potential and contribute to the success of businesses and organisations across the UK will be realised.

Culture

During the focus groups we wanted to understand what women believed about the culture in their workplace. How was their ability to progress and develop affected by culture? How was their profession impacted by the wider cultural norms within their industry? For example, whilst their company might be progressive, their industry may not be ready.

The focus groups were also able to explore some additional hypotheses, including:

- I am encouraged to look for opportunities to progress and learn by my employer
- I am satisfied that there is enough action being taken by those responsible, to close the gender pay gap in my industry

“There is always a fear of the unknown. So, asking for permission to do something will often lead to a ‘no’. There is a lack of desire to change and try something new.”

Louise (*) works hard, her boss is a man. She is high performing, well respected by her peers and systematically overlooked for promotion. Louise has never asked for a pay rise and never prepared for her appraisal by reflecting on her successes and presenting them to her boss. Louise believes her work should speak for itself. The behaviours exhibited by Louise’s boss mean that he does not value silence, he responds to the person who shouts the loudest about their achievements.

Peggy (*) had her dream job in a highly respected public body. She was, she felt, living the dream. Happily married she was expecting her first child. Peggy’s boss was a woman, after sharing her pregnancy news Peggy’s work life changed dramatically. Her boss changed the reporting line of some of Peggy’s team, took key projects away from her and stopped her from attending the senior management team “You’ll be gone soon, so it’s better you concentrate on the day job, leave the strategy to us,” said her boss. Peggy was broken. She went from a strong, happy, confident woman, excited about her first baby; to lacking in confidence and wanting out. She took some money and signed a compromise agreement. Once she left, ex-colleagues confided in her about their similar experiences of the bullying boss.

“It’s best to just get on and do it and show how it’s worked, then it’s more likely to be adopted. If it doesn’t work, then you move on but at least you’ve tried. You must be prepared to take a chance on something.”

Confidence

Only one third of women we spoke to at Spring Forward 2018 had confidence in the systems at their organisation – and so they were unable to have confidence that everyone would be treated fairly. It is again a systemic approach that will change this lack of confidence in organisational systems. This is not about women going on assertiveness training; this is about everyone in an organisation having confidence in the processes that apply to recruitment, promotion, bonuses and opportunities for progression and development.

“Your work is such a massive part of your life, but you must think of your whole life, family is very important too. So, I’ve had to decide to leave in the end. I really couldn’t work somewhere that is so far behind in their thinking.”

Mary (*) was a Big Four ACA qualified Finance Director and had 12 years of finance experience, she left to have children and was ready to return to work full time a few years later. The first recruiter she went to see was dismissive and asked her “are you qualified?” other recruiters also failed to look past her recent part time junior manager role. Mary is a strong woman, with an effective network and a belief in her abilities. She did have to take a more junior role but her employer quickly recognised her

capability and promoted her within a year. She is now Chief Financial Officer for a fast growing and successful company.

“Attending similar events like today will help instil confidence that you’re not the only person facing these challenges”

“I had a boss who was a bully and that undermined my confidence completely. I felt I had failed. So, I moved to a slightly different job and when I watched my replacement, they were no better than me at all. I realised I should have had more confidence in my own ability in the first place.”

Choice

Women often talk about the lack of choices they have in their lives; little access to part time work, lack of additional flexibility for family/pet/elderly relatives or to go off and indulge their love of cross-country skiing.

A few years ago, Vodafone rewrote all of its job descriptions so every role is open to flexible working: “With the right technology, people can work effectively and securely wherever they are. It enables our business and public sector customers to benefit from lower costs, faster and more effective operations, and increased employee wellbeing. Flexible working has benefits for the environment, too, with fewer cars on the road and reduced demand for office space and parking.” <https://bit.ly/2RsoR2V>, or search for ‘Vodafone flexible working’

“We need change, our natural qualities shouldn’t hold us back”

But choice is not just about flexible working, it is also about the options available to choose the right career path, career options and have support to do so. Women have long been influenced to choose a certain, ‘appropriate’ way and therefore find themselves associated with less ‘risky’ choices.

In her seminal book *My Mother Myself*, Nancy Friday reports on a social experiment in the 1970s where parents watched their young sons and daughters play in a garden; the girls were all universally reprimanded for dirtying their clothes, grazing their knees and the boys were all universally praised for their bravery and exploration.

Grayson Perry in the *Descent of Man* writes powerfully about how we are still bringing up our boys to be tough, macho and without feeling; training them to ‘succeed’ whatever the cost to them or society.

In the workplace, this manifests itself in many ways. We asked women how they felt about the choices afforded to them.

“I’ve worked for a massive organisation for over a decade. I did well at school and I absolutely love my job, it’s my outlet. I’ve got a child with severe additional needs and work is very important to me, to be myself. My child’s needs are increasing, and I asked for more flexibility in my work and they said NO, NOTHING, ZILCH. It really upset me.”

But there is hope, in the younger generation of men in the workplace.

“You find when you speak out about diversity you get a good reaction from the younger male generation but the more traditional men, who were brought up by 1950’s housewives, are struggling to move forward. I was only brave enough to speak up because I’m leaving the company. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.”

Recommendations

For employers

Workplaces should have mentoring schemes in place; if employers are keen on having a more diverse workforce, their mentoring schemes should be focused on delivering that pipeline, to specified timescales and numbers.

Publish and be clear on the route to senior positions. Open up the processes and systems all candidates must go through. Enable all diverse candidates, including women, to have confidence in the systems at their place of work.

Based on the Rooney Rule, we are calling for the implementation of Rosie's Rule. For organisations who want more gender balance in their senior leadership positions, Rosie's Rule recommends at least one competent and qualified woman is interviewed for the role. If unsuccessful, she is offered both a sponsor and a mentor. She is given a personalised intensive learning and development plan for six months; at least two mock interviews and detailed, supportive feedback. On her second interview, she should be successful. If she is not, the company should ask itself some very challenging questions around its culture. The individual should be given the opportunity to try for a third time, or if she wishes, can ask for bespoke support and opportunity to apply for a senior level position in another organisation.

For women

Seek out a mentor and consider a sponsor. Mentors help you get around the running track, holding your water and sometimes running with you. Sponsors greet you at the start line, go into the bar to tell their colleague what a brilliant runner you are, and suggests they consider you for their team; then meet you afterwards with your split times and suggest key people you could meet who are looking for a runner.

Be yourself, look after yourself and back your own self.

Do not rely on your results to speak for themselves; prepare well for all appraisals or reviews, ensure you evidence your work and do not be afraid to ask for a pay rise.

Build strong networks inside and outside the organisation where you work; join a national association or professional body and get involved in shaping the future of your own profession.

If a board position is within your sights, make time to get experience in a variety of roles, paid and unpaid, consider becoming a school governor or a trustee of a charity.

Conclusion

The current culture within the workplace and emphasis on typical alpha-male qualities needs to change. This along with embracing the natural qualities of women will encourage more progressive leadership and greater diversity at a senior level.

If business and organisations do not embrace every type of diversity, including gender, race, socio-economic background, educational differences, age, disability, sexuality then there will not be diverse boards. One area is to allow women to be themselves, along with anyone who is from a different background to that of the alpha (mainly white) male.

With a change in culture, increased confidence and greater choice boardrooms can become more attractive to the many competent and qualified women who are ready for board level roles. Progress can and should be faster.

Notes

All names have been changed in this report.

Proportions and percentages are used in this document to indicate the strength of feeling among the women at the conference, we understand that this is based on a small sample size and intend to add to this body of work at future events and conferences.

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